

February 3, 2011

**My Testimony Before the Montana State Legislature...Mark Diaz**

In August of 2008 my 55 years of working and building and doing my best to live the American Dream evaporated. Along with everything material, my marriage of 10 years collapsed and I found myself homeless and without family. The economy had collapsed. It was something like the stock market crash of 1929...2 of my personal friends, one a Mortgage Banker and the other a Realtor/Developer, committed suicide.

Suicide became such a problem in the Georgia Real Estate Community, some estimated 75,000 people...that The National Association of Realtors and others involved in the Housing Industry actually sponsored free Counseling Services for those affected by the crash.

I employed my faith in God and my training in life as a builder to begin removing the rubble from the storm, and then began clearing a spot for my new life.

I had been a fairly successful Realtor/Property Developer in the Atlanta area for a number of years. I had lost everything materially but I still had a lifetime of acquired skills and, of course, I had God.

I ended up in Montana in July of 2009 (long story and yes a woman was involved).

Also involved in my life was my Christian faith that told me often times the best way for us to heal and rebuild ourselves is by helping others who have much more serious needs. Like the poem says "I cried because I had no shoes until I saw a man with no feet". That view tends to diminish our own pity pots.

I've been a homeless man for a total of 4 months out of the last 18 months. I have not been homeless for the last 14 months or so...but I have been constantly on the verge of homelessness.

I have been asked by Rocky Mountain Development Council to testify regarding my experience with them. I can tell you right away that the work that they do in concert with other organizations truly saved my life. It doesn't take long to freeze to death in sub-zero temperatures.

I would like to thank the following people and organizations for getting me through the rough spots the last year and a half or so:

Jeff Wood at the Lewis and Clark County Office of Public Assistance...His predecessor and the SNAP program fed me with an adequate food stamp allowance of \$200 per month. Just as important they gave me a referral to CTI who helped me pay my cell phone minutes and fuel for my car so that I would have that all important phone number needed to look for work.

CTI also gave me a valuable referral to Jackie Lynch at Experience Works.

The Experience Works Program gave me the ability to earn a part time, minimum wage, pay check which allowed me to pay rent at the Iron Front Hotel.

Thanks to Jackie Lynch and Melinda Hoskins at Experience Works for coordinating with Deb Smith from Job Service and the folks at Good Samaritan. As a team they were able to pool enough money to get my car repaired so that I can seek full time employment outside of the Experience Works Program.

Over the last year and a half or so I've come to truly Thank God and the kind people who are willing to give a hand up to the poor.

I remember a year ago last Christmas...I was one of those men that you see holding a cardboard sign asking for rent money...that week before Christmas 2009 it was 20 to 40 degrees below zero F.

Later, when I told my landlord about 'flying a sign' to pay for rent, he asked me if the experience was *humiliating*...I responded "*humbling yes, humiliating, no*...everyone who helped me also gave me that ounce of dignity that goes so far in difficult times".

I remember one woman who felt badly that she didn't have an extra dollar to give me...but she parked her car and gave me the gloves off her own hands. I told her 'thank you so much, this is just a season for me...it won't be forever'. She smiled and somehow wasn't as worried about me because of my attitude of gratitude. We both knew it would just be for a season.

I thank God for my part time income through Experience Works...it has, for the most part, covered my rent but there have been rough spots and that is where the Rocky Mountain Development Council was able to keep me with a roof over my head a few months ago.

They paid my rent when I hit a financial rough spot and this was enough to float me through another month. It was during a time that God's Love, the homeless shelter, didn't have room.

At that point I had managed to not be homeless for about a year...Without Rocky Mountain Development Council I would have lost my room at the Iron Front Hotel and I would have been sleeping in my car because there was no room at God's Love at the time. It doesn't take long to freeze to death at 40 degrees below zero F.

Rocky Mountain Development Council's financial help allowed me to continue having a roof over my head while a section 8 voucher was being approved. I will be moving into a peaceful 1 bedroom apartment in the next few weeks.

Regarding my personal progress in rebuilding my life: I continue to seek full time employment outside of Experience Works...and I continue to thank and praise God and do His work helping others, as I can.

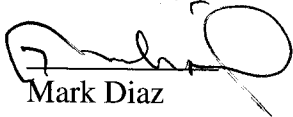
For my longer range goals, there are a couple of industries that appreciate men who have the same color hair as I. One field is Teaching, the other field is Family Counseling.

The highest and best use of my remaining years will be in one or both of those fields. I have many years of transferable skills from years of voluntary service in both the field of Family Counseling as well as Teaching but it appears that I will need a 4 year degree in those fields in order to earn an income. So I look forward to attending Carroll College for four years beginning this August.

The team of people at Rocky Mountain Development Council and all of the rest of the people whom I have mentioned have gone above and beyond the call of duty. Please continue to fund them and *expand their services if possible*...the last I heard, Montana has a 311 million dollar surplus.

Please continue these policies of humanity that have blessed Montana to this point.

Respectfully,



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